

# Frail Egos and Sandpit Colonialism: Australia, the United States and Invading Iraq

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*Former Australian **Prime Minister John Howard** is in the news again. The [release of Australian cabinet documents](#) from 2004 – a supposed treat for historians of Australian history each new year – has been given a typically modest, calm and boringly anodyne treatment in media outlets.*

One topic featured should have caused continued sharp intakes of breath and stirs of indignation: Australia's participation in the invasion of Iraq in March 2003. Led by the United States with clinging support from the United Kingdom and Australia, ostensibly to disarm **Saddam Hussein's** regime of biological, chemical and dare it be said, possible nuclear weapons, was a crude example of buccaneering, criminal adventurism. It was illegal, lacking the approval of the United Nations Security Council. It was almost certainly a crime against the peace, a higher offence developed by drafters and judicial authorities during the Nuremberg war crimes trials of 1945-6.

The words of US chief prosecutor at Nuremberg, **Robert H. Jackson**, delivered in his [opening statement](#) to the International Military Tribunal in November 1945, are all too pertinent. While Nazi Germany is the target of his address, the US-led coalition can do just as well as substitutes:

“That attack on the peace of the world is a crime against international society which brings into international cognizance crimes in its aid and preparation which otherwise might be only internal concerns. It was aggressive war, which the nations of the world had renounced.”

This vast hinterland of venality, incompetence, and indifference to international law – the very sort of things countries such as the United States and Australia hyperventilate over when concerning adversaries – should have received more comment. The issue of Iraq in the 2004 cabinet release receives some mention in David Lee's [rather skimpy overview](#), perhaps unsurprising given that he occupies the position of National Archives of Australia Cabinet Historian.

In a [comment](#) to *Guardian Australia*, however, Lee makes a suggestion that should make the blood of service personnel and Australia's citizenry boil.

“The balance of evidence we've seen from the cabinet records from 2003 and 2004 indicate that weapons of mass destruction is not the casus belli – the cause of war – for Australia, but rather Australia's desire to strengthen the US alliance.”

Put another way, the commitment was, as have most Australian commitments to war been over its short history, a matter of impressing others.

The released documents do reveal that the Howard government, through its National Security Committee (NSC) of key ministers, had approved the deployment of forces three months *prior* to the official authorisation of Australia's involvement on March 18, 2003, and began planning for it from August 2002 onwards. This meant that Australia, along with the US and UK, had long given up on getting a UN Security Council resolution authorising an invasion, let alone waiting for the findings from ongoing UN weapons inspectors.

This hideous sense of a chugging, unstoppable train to war is evident in the admission on the part of Australian Foreign Affairs Minister, **Alexander Downer**, that the WMD issue was scratchy at best. A January 10, 2003 oral briefing on the efforts of the UN weapons inspectors drew a rueful observation: "there was no confidence that the inspection process would uncover clear evidence of continuing Iraqi weapons of mass destruction programmes".

On February 10, 2004, the NSC [met to discuss](#) the release of a public version of a review by the Department of Defence of Iraq operations. The advanced deployment, above all else, had to be kept secret from the public, described in the minute as "the specific issue of public handling of when ADF action in Iraq commenced". This had an added urgency, given that the Bush administration had, by January 2004, conceded that launching a war to disarm a state of its weapons of mass destruction (WMD) had been without merit. The Howard government not only risked having its mendacity exposed, but its competence questioned.

Showing that old dogs (and dogmas) are beyond learning new tricks, Howard remains unmoved and unenlightened by his role in this bloody affair. Last November, ahead of the release of the cabinet papers, he [merely admitted](#) to being disappointed by the failure of US intelligence assessments he refused to question. He still "tenaciously" maintained "that the decision was taken in good faith, based largely on what was called a national intelligence assessment."

When considering such assessments, the former PM continues to prove slippery. "I knew from earlier examinations that there had been a failure to find stockpiles, in other words, the physical weapons, although there was plenty of capacity through programs to develop them rapidly." When a failure to find something is paired with the capacity to develop it, its absence becomes irrelevant. The capacity to develop a weapon becomes the equivalent of hypothetically having it.

As if hearing the sound of a distant arrest warrant being rustled up in The Hague, Howard concludes that, "We were wrong, in fact, but not maliciously." Like the fate that was to cruelly befall so many Iraqis and those in the broader Middle East, such a claim lacks legs, arms, or any limbs for that matter. It is also impossible to reconcile with the hardboiled zealotry that marked Washington's desire to redraw the Middle East in a fit of forced democratisation.

The journey into Mesopotamia was a blind mission of assumption and presumption: the instant, easeful discovery of WMDs in the possession of a madman previously feted by the West; the creation of a transitional authority without hiccup, despite a wholesale dismantling of the Baathist state. Neither eventuated. The invaders were sandpit colonialists, poorly costumed to reenact the glory days of European empires in the Middle

East with trimmed forces and smaller budgets. What makes Australia's own involvement even worse, was that the reason to go to war lay less in an international security threat than a weak ego and reputational yearning: to be cringingly worthy to Washington.

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